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This article is intended to provide a brief but nuanced overview of an eastern Iranian people whose contribution to both the material and ideological culture of the “Silk Road” has only recently become the focus of rigorous academic study. The evolution of Sogdian commercial activities in the region has been thoroughly explored—within the limits of currently available material—by Étienne de la Vaissière, in the updated, English edition of his history of Sogdian merchants.¹ My intention is not to replicate that research but to consider the impact of the Sogdians—in particular, their adherence to ancient Iranian beliefs and practices—on the language, culture, and religious expression of the trade routes between the fourth and eighth centuries CE.

Historical Background to Sogdian Trade and Traffic

Traffic had existed between China and Central Asia since the mid-second millennium BCE, when nephrite jade from Khotan began to make its way to China, the Eurasian Steppe, and Siberia.² But it was under the Ancient Persians (ca. 550–330 BCE) that more stable trade routes were established and that, as an Achaemenid satrapy, Sogdian involvement in commercial enterprise between “east” and “west” began in earnest.³ An inscribed list of sources at Susa describes the origins of the materials used to build the Achaemenid king Darius I’s palace complex there.⁴ Although most of the craftsmen and some items came from the Near East—such as ebony and silver from Egypt and cedar from Lebanon—many of the raw materials were supplied by satrapies in the northeast of the empire: gold from Bactria; lapis lazuli and carnelian (or cinnabar) from Sogdiana; turquoise from Chorasmia; and ivory from Arachosia and India.⁵

In the late fourth century BCE, Alexander of Macedon pursued the last Achaemenid king, Darius III, to Bactria and then pushed his campaign farther into the eastern satrapies.

Some of the ideas in this essay are further developed in a chapter on the Zoroastrians in Central Asia in my book *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

1. Étienne de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders: A History*, trans. James Ward (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

2. Elena E. Kuz'mina and Victor H. Mair, *The Prehistory of the Silk Road* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 3–4; Carol Michaelson, “Jade and the Silk Road: Trade and Tribute in the First Millennium,” in *The Silk Road: Trade, Travel, War, Faith*, ed. Susan Whitfield and Ursula Sims-Williams (Chicago: Serindia, 2004), 44.

3. Old Persian cuneiform inscriptions mention Achaemenid hegemony over the satrapy of Sogdiana. See, e.g., Darius’s inscription at Bisitun, 1.16. Herodotus includes the Sogdians as one of the nations composing Xerxes’ army. *Histories* 7.66.

4. Darius’s inscription at Susa, f: see Roland G. Kent, *Old Persian Grammar, Texts, Lexicon* (1953; repr., New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1983), 142–44. Citations are to the American Oriental Society edition.

5. For a discussion of the translation of Old Persian *Sinkabru* as cinnabar, rather than carnelian, see de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 19.

In about 327 BCE, Alexander besieged and captured a fortress in Sogdiana, known in his biographies as the “Sogdian Rock,” where the local Bactrian chief, Oxyartes, had placed his wife and daughters for safekeeping.⁶ One of those daughters was Rokhshana, whom Alexander later married. At about the time that the Parthians were rising to power against the Seleucids to the west, Sogdiana was briefly incorporated into the independent GrecoBactrian kingdom but soon became an autonomous state, subject to successive incursions of nomadic groups from the steppes, including the Saka, the Hephthalites, and the Turkic Qaghans.

In the late second century BCE, the Han imperial envoy Zhang Qian was sent to make an alliance with the peoples of Central Asia, in particular of Sogdiana, in order to combat incursions into northern China from the Xiongnu steppe nomads.⁷ The Han government used both diplomacy and force to counter the horse raids of the Xiongnu. On his second diplomatic mission between 119 and 115 BCE, Zhang Qian is said to have brought “tens of thousands” of cattle and sheep with him and to have offered gold and silk goods in great quantities, to buy political influence on China’s northwestern frontier.⁸ Han gold was derived mostly from river deposits, as there were only a few gold mines in operation. The gold was cast primarily into round or “hoof” shapes or gold ingots for trading.⁹

The Han also used gold and silk to purchase the famous Fergana horses, which were larger and stronger than the steppe ponies and were used by the Chinese to breed battle steeds for cavalry counterattacks against the nomadic raids.¹⁰ Han histories use epithets such as “blood

sweating,” “of dragon seed,” and “heavenly” to refer to these prized horses.¹¹ The *Hou Han Shu*, a history of the Han compiled in the fifth century CE, records that a delegation of Sogdians and Xiongnu had brought Fergana horses to China as gifts, with the intention of furthering such trade relations as had been encouraged by Zhang Qian’s reports and subsequent Chinese missions.¹² Records show that during the Tang period (618–907 CE), in one year the Chinese court exchanged more than a seventh of its revenue of silk for horses from Central Asia.¹³ Tang period tombs include *mingqi*—terra cotta tomb figures—of horses and their Central Asian grooms and trainers, symbolic of the importance of the horse in the leisured lifestyle of the Chinese aristocracy.

In 117 CE, the Roman emperor Hadrian withdrew from Mesopotamia, and the Parthians took control of the sea route to Rome via Syria. At this time, Indian and Bactrian traders were more prominent on the eastern trade routes, but by the early fourth century CE, the Sogdians had established settlements throughout the Tarim Basin between Kashgar and Dunhuang, in the region now known as Xinjiang province. This migration may have been stimulated by the steady decline in urban life at the time, which was accompanied by a concurrent increase in the building of fortified castles across the fertile Zarafshan valley and by intensified agricultural development.¹⁴ Such socioeconomic changes would have compelled some merchants to move to more promising locations to find customers. From this period on, Sogdian manuscripts, inscriptions, and iconography are found along the northern trading routes, as well as in Ladakh, Kirghizia, Mongolia, and northern Pakistan.

6. Arrian, *Anabasis* 4.18.4–19.6; and Strabo, *Geographia* 11.11.2–4.

7. De la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 29. The Chinese history *Shiji*, which incorporated information from Zhang Qian’s reports, refers to the Sogdians (by the name *Kangju*) as a people who might be persuaded “by gifts and the prospect of gain” to ally with the Han (*ibid.*).

8. B. Watson, trans., *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II*, rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 238.

9. Walter Scheidel, “The Monetary Systems of the Han and Roman Empires,” Princeton/Stanford Working Papers in Classics, version 2.0 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2008), 19, www.princeton.edu/~pswpc/pdfs/scheidel/020803.pdf.

10. H. G. Creel, “The Role of the Horse in Chinese History,” *American Historical Review* 70 (1965): 660.

11. For references to these epithets, see *ibid.*, 661. Contemporary Chinese sources such as the *Shiji* call Fergana “Dayuan.” See de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 27.

12. Mariko Namba Walter, “Sogdians and Buddhism,” *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 174 (2006): 15, www.sino-platonic.org/complete/spp174_sogdian_buddhism.pdf.

13. X. Liu, “The Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Interactions in Eurasia,” in *Agricultural Pastoral Societies in Ancient and Classical History*, ed. M. Adas (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 169.

14. G. V. Shishkina, “Ancient Samarkand: Capital of Sogd,” *Bulletin of the Asia Institute (BAI)* 8 (1994 [1996]): 90.

Evidence for Widespread Sogdian Mercantile Activity

In the Upper Indus Valley, at several sites along the Karakorum Highway, but primarily Shatial, more than six hundred Sogdian rock inscriptions in Aramaic script have been found.¹⁵ This graffiti seems to date to about the mid-fifth century CE, and the information provided is mostly onomastic, signifying the predominance of Iranian personal names.¹⁶ This material is located at sites on the southern trading route where Sogdian and Indian merchants bartered their wares. The many Buddhist-themed petroglyphs, alongside Kharoshthi and Brahmi inscriptions, attest that traders from India were predominantly Buddhist.¹⁷ Recent analysis indicates that some of the Sogdians were en route for China, although it is not clear whether they passed over the Pamirs or through Bactria.¹⁸

Most merchants did not travel the entirety of the “Silk Road” but would trade goods through middlemen based in oasis towns such as Khotan or Dunhuang. The Sogdians, however, established a trading network across the fifteen hundred miles between Sogdiana and northern China that included staging posts with substantial communities. They settled at Gaochang, Toyok, and Hami in the north; Khotan in the south; Dunhuang, where the two routes converge on the eastern edge of the Taklimakan desert; and on into the Chinese cities of Changan, Luoyang, and Yangzhou.¹⁹ An indicator of the predominance of the Sogdians in

the traffic and trade across this region is the fact that Sogdian became a lingua franca of commerce. The Sogdians had adopted the Imperial Aramaic script of Achaemenid official, commercial, and literary correspondence and continued to use it in various forms in successive centuries and locations.²⁰ A range of written and visual texts attests to both the ubiquity of the Sogdian language along the Central Asian trade routes and the extensive relocation of the Sogdians themselves. In fact, the Khotanese used the term *Sogdian* (Khotanese *suli*) as a generic reference to all merchants, regardless of their origins.²¹

Fourth-century CE Sogdian letters found near the trading post of Dunhuang tell us that local commodities included gold and silver, much of which had been worked into filigree ornaments, such as hair clasps and vessels in Persian style by artisans, whose metalwork then had a significant influence on Chinese forms.²² Other goods mentioned in these “Ancient Letters” as being traded to the Chinese are woolen cloth (including Roman purple), hemp, linen, wheat, pepper, and camphor.²³ The last two items denote commercial relations with India and southeastern Asia. It was originally thought that silk was absent from the letters as a traded commodity, but recent research shows that the word used for silk is *pirchik*, a term derived from Khotanese.²⁴

Some of the items indicate that Sogdian reliance on trade was generally supported by agrarian production, which provided many of

15. Nicholas Sims-Williams, “The Sogdian Merchants in China and India,” in *Cina e Iran: Da Alessandro Magno alla dinastia Tang (China and Iran: From Alexander the Great to the Tang Dynasty)*, ed. Alfred Cadenot and Lionello Lanciotti (Florence: Olschki, 1996), 52–53. Other sites of graffiti are Chilas, Thor North, and Dadam Das. Two Middle Persian, two Parthian, and about ten Bactrian inscriptions were also found. Nicholas Sims-Williams, *Sogdian and Other Iranian Inscriptions of the Upper Indus*, pt. 1, *Inscriptions of the Seleucid and Parthian Periods of Eastern Iran and Central Asia* (London: Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum and the School of Oriental and African Studies, 1989), 8.

16. Karl Jettmar considers whether the graffiti post-dates the Hephthalite incorporation of Sogdiana in the late fifth century. Karl Jettmar, “Symbolic Systems in Collision: Rock Art in the Upper Indus Valley,” in *Gandhara Art in Context: East-West Exchanges at the Crossroads of Asia*, ed. Raymond Allchin (New Delhi: Regency, 1997), 64. For further discussion of the significance of the site and the dating of the graffiti,

see also Sims-Williams, “Sogdian Merchants,” 52–54; and de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 83. Some of the names are Middle Persian, one is Parthian, and others seem to allude to place-names in Sogdiana. See Sims-Williams, “Sogdian Merchants,” 54–55.

17. Jettmar, “Symbolic Systems in Collision,” 56.

18. Sims-Williams (“Sogdian Merchants,” 54–56) suggests that the prominence of names dedicated to the Oxus (*Wakhsh*) may indicate the latter route.

19. Judith A. Lerner, “The Merchant Empire of the Sogdians,” in *Monks and Merchants: Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China; Gansu and Ningxia, Fourth through Seventh Century*, ed. Annette L. Juliano and Judith A. Lerner (New York: Abrams and Asia Society, 2001), 225.

20. The Sogdian language fell out of use after the tenth century CE but survives in the minority language of Yagnobi, still spoken in the Yagnob valley of northern Tajikistan.

21. Sims-Williams, “Sogdian Merchants,” 46n6.

22. For a detailed analysis of the date of the letters, see Frantz Grenet and Nicholas Sims-Williams, “The Historical Context of the Sogdian Ancient Letters,” in *Transition Periods in Iranian History, Studia Iranica* 5 (Paris: Association pour l’Avancement des Études Iraniques, 1987), 101–22. The use of gold and silver is referred to in Nicholas Sims-Williams “Sogdian Ancient Letter II” in Juliano and Lerner, *Monks and Merchants*, 47; and Susan Whitfield, *Life along the Silk Road* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 38.

23. On Roman purple, see Sims-Williams, “Sogdian Merchants,” 60. On goods traded, see *ibid.*, 48.

24. See Judith A. Lerner, “Shorter Notices,” *BAI* 15 (2001 [2005]): 151–62. Lerner discusses an as yet unpublished conference presentation by Nicholas Sims-Williams titled “Towards a New Edition of the Sogdian Ancient Letters,” given at the international colloquium “Les Sogdiens en Chine,” held in Beijing, 23–25 April 2004.

the goods.²⁵ The *Hou Han Shu* states that Sogdiana produces “famous horses, cattle, sheep, grapes, and all sorts of fruit. The water and soil of this country are excellent, which is why its grape wine is so famous.”²⁶ The grapevine and alfalfa were among plants imported from Sogdiana to be grown in China.²⁷ Presumably, the latter was used to feed the Fergana horses. Ancient Letter II, destined for Samarqand, refers to musk (which would have come from the borders of Tibet) being sent from Dunhuang, indicating that the postal service did not accompany the merchandise.²⁸ Musk was measured in vesicles.²⁹ Other quantities mentioned indicate that merchants concentrated on goods with a high yield of income per weight. The value of most of the goods was calculated in silver staters (Sogdian *styr*), the currency of the Sogdians based on the tetradrachms of Euthydemus.³⁰ The use of “coppers” (Sogdian *rwðk*) for small change is doubtless a reference to the cast copper currency of the Chinese.³¹ The Ancient Letters make no mention of the *drachm*, which is the exclusive unit of currency mentioned in the eighth-century Mount Mug documents.³²

The Ancient Letters were found in 1907 by the British archaeologist Aurel Stein in a postbag in the ruins of a watchtower near Dunhuang. They provide information not only about the goods exchanged and the early network of trade and commerce between Central Asia and China via the Tarim Basin but also about the Sogdian merchants and artisans who were involved. Later documents and murals reveal that traffic also involved people of faith, including monks and missionaries.

Written in Old Sogdian Aramaic script on paper, with the name and location of the recipient on the outside, the Ancient Letters are mostly about trade, although one is from a Sogdian merchant's wife, named Miwnay, to

her husband, Nanaidhat. The two had relocated from Samarqand to Dunhuang, where Nanaidhat seems to have got into financial trouble and left town. His wife, abandoned and destitute, had become a servant in a Chinese household to support herself and her young daughter, Shayn. The tone of the letter is along the lines of “I should have listened to my mother and never married you!”³³

In another letter, to her mother, Chatis, in Samarqand, Miwnay bemoans her lot, complaining that she has asked several local Sogdians, including a relative, for a loan to return home, but that no one has offered her any help, so she has been dependent on support from the priest. Miwnay writes that if she decided to leave the city, the priest would provide her with a camel and a man to accompany her.³⁴ The letters inform us that, although Miwnay looked after her husband's business affairs, she did not have financial independence. Although Samarqand evidently continued to function as a home depot during this period, the allusion to a temple priest (*βgnpt*) in Dunhuang indicates that the Sogdian Zoroastrian population there was already numerous enough to support its own place of worship and a residential priest.³⁵

Sogdians in Their Homeland

By the mid-fifth century CE, the former urban districts of Sogdiana began to revive and new city walls were constructed.³⁶ Small city-states were established in the area of the Zarafshan Valley extending from the Amu Darya (Oxus) to the Syr Darya (Jaxartes), including Samarqand, Bukhara, Varakhsha, and Panjikent, and extending as far east as Chach (modern Tashkent). Sogdians were identified as belonging to one of three main groups: aristocrats, merchants, and workers, indicating that craftsmen and traders were significant members of this

25. Agriculture was sustained by artificial irrigation from the large rivers in the region. Lerner, “Merchant Empire,” 222. It seems that, whereas in Sassanian Iran agriculture formed a constant basis for the economy in Sogdiana, it was less reliable as a result of frequent nomadic incursions. Cf. Richard N. Frye, “Bukhara and Zananandaniji,” in *Central Asian Textiles and Their Contexts in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Regula Schorta (Rigisberg, Switzerland: Abegg-Stiftung, 2006), 76; and de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 100–101, 103–6.

26. See John E. Hill, “The *Xiyu juan* ‘Chapter on the Western Regions’ from *Hou Hanshu* 88, Second Edition,” September 2003, depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/hhshu/hou_han_shu.html.

27. Sims-Williams, “Sogdian Merchants,” 61.

28. De la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 48.

29. Sims-Williams, “Sogdian Ancient Letter II,” 49.

30. Grenet and Sims-Williams, “Sogdian Ancient Letters,” 113.

31. Sims-Williams, “Sogdian Merchants,” 50.

32. See Grenet and Sims-Williams, “Sogdian Ancient Letters,” 113.

33. See Whitfield and Sims-Williams, *Silk Road*, 249.

34. Ibid.

35. On the reference to the temple priest, see Sims-Williams, “Sogdian Merchants,” 48.

36. De la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 109.

urban-centered society.³⁷ Local rulers came from the nobility, which was not as stratified as in Iran. As the cities developed, both rich and poor alike decorated their houses—which were often two-storied structures—with murals and woodcarvings.³⁸ City streets and bazaar areas were lined with commercial stores and workshops, fronting residential buildings.

Sogdiana was a midpoint on the trade routes: it functioned as a conduit between commercial centers in China, India, Sassanian Iran, and Byzantium. Initially, the Sassanians (ca. 224–651 CE) maintained a monopoly on the transport of goods, particularly silk, to Byzantium, denying access through Iran to foreign caravans. But in the late sixth century, as allies of the Turkic Qaghan, the Sogdians entered a trade agreement with Byzantium that gave them access across the Caucasus, circumventing Iran. The Byzantine *History of Menander Protector* records that in 568 CE a Turco-Sogdian delegation headed by a Sogdian named Maniakh traveled to the Roman emperor in Constantinople to obtain permission to trade.³⁹ This encounter, and subsequent negotiations, resulted in a flourishing traffic in silk between Sogdiana, the Western Turks, and Byzantium. Maniakh was able to briefly establish a western outlet for Sogdian commerce, an enterprise that was continued by his son but which Byzantine control seems quickly to have restricted to the northern coast of the Black Sea.⁴⁰

Sogdian Religious Expression

As evidenced by their literary relics, the Sogdians epitomize the religious plurality found along the trade routes traversing the region.

From the late third century onward, both Christians and Manichaeans came to Central Asia, first as missionaries, and then as refugees, from Sassanian Iran, and many learned Sogdian before continuing east to the oasis cities of Xinjiang and beyond.⁴¹ Sogdian became, then, the principal language of dissemination of both Manichaeism and so-called Nestorian Christianity to the Chinese. That some Sogdians converted may be evidenced by Sogdian Christian texts from the Bulayīq monastery to the north of Turpan and the numerous Manichaean texts in Sogdian from nearby Qocho.⁴² A wall painting of Manichaean *Electi* at Qocho identifies these adherents, in late Sogdian characters, as having Iranian names.⁴³ Chinese Buddhist hagiographies record that from the second century CE onward, Sogdian Buddhist monks (with the surname “Kang”) settled in the Xinjiang region and the main cities of inner China, such as Changan.⁴⁴ One Sogdian Buddhist monk, Kang Seng Hui, was a Sogdian merchant’s son, whose family had lived in India for several generations and had then moved to Tonkin.⁴⁵ Brought up as an orphan in the early third century CE, Kang Seng Hui is said to have been the first to introduce Buddhism to the Nanking region of southern China.⁴⁶ Although the largest body of Sogdian texts is Buddhist, and Sogdians numbered among the main translators of Buddhist sutras into Chinese, Buddhism did not take root in Sogdiana itself.⁴⁷ The predominant culture in Sogdiana remained Iranian and closely related to that of its Sassanian neighbors.

Sogdians are mentioned in a Young Avestan text (*Videvdad* 1.4), preserved in writing by the Sassanians, as dwelling in one of the six-

37. Frye, “Bukhara and Zandandani,” 76.

38. Boris I. Marshak, “Panjikant,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, www.iranica.com/articles/panjikant (2002).

39. Lerner, “Merchant Empire,” 223; de la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 234–37.

40. De la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 167, 248–49.

41. See Whitfield, *Life along the Silk Road*, 20; and Edward H. Schafer, *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand: A Study of T’ang Exotics* (1963; repr., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 10.

42. These are mostly translations from Syriac biblical commentaries, homilies, and hagiographies. See S. Brock, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2006), 146.

43. Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Manichaean Art and Calligraphy* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 29. These eighth- or ninth-century paintings may, however, depict Persian Manichaeans.

44. See above, note 6, regarding the *Shiji* reference to the region as *Kangju*, whose inhabitants were known as “Kang.” See also Walter, “Sogdians and Buddhism,” 27. According to Frantz Grenet, the nominal “Kang” denotes an origin from Samarqand. Frantz Grenet, “Religious Diversity among Sogdian Merchants in Sixth-Century China: Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Hinduism,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27 (2007): 465.

45. De la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 71–72.

46. Lerner, “Merchant Empire,” 227, 228n1.

47. No Buddhist texts were found in Sogdiana proper. Most of the thirty Sogdian Buddhist texts found at Dunhuang are translations from Chinese, although the *Vessantara Jataka* appears to be a Sogdian retelling rather than a direct translation. It includes reference to “Mithra, the Judge of Creation” along with other spirits that do not appear in the Pali version. See B. Stavisky, “Bactria and Gandhara: The Old Problem Reconsidered in the Light of Archaeological Data from Old Termez,” in Allchin et al., *Gandhara Art in Context*, 29–34.

teen good lands fashioned for Iranians by Ahura Mazda, the “Wise Lord” of the Zoroastrian religion. That the Sogdians’ prime religious affiliation remained to the Zoroastrian tradition is evidenced by the discoveries of murals depicting votaries making offerings before fire holders and a couple of actual fire holders.⁴⁸ Clay ossuaries from Samarqand, Panjikent, and Er-Kurgan, dating to the fifth or sixth century, held the bones of the dead after exposure according to Zoroastrian ritual.⁴⁹ The ossuaries were then placed in vaulted family burial chambers. Some of these, and later ossuaries, incorporate Zoroastrian motifs.⁵⁰ A Chinese traveler, writing in about 605 CE, noted that there were many households outside the city walls of Samarqand specializing “in funerary matters,” including looking after the dogs that would dispose of the corpses.⁵¹ The practice of ossuary making disappeared in the second half of the eighth century, not long after the Islamic conquest, which suggests that the practice of exposure was largely abandoned and was replaced by burial.⁵² One of the last Sogdian kings, Devastich, was executed by the Umayyad Arab governor at the site of a Zoroastrian “bone depository” in 723 CE.⁵³

The form of Zoroastrianism practiced by Sogdians included some elements not evidenced in Sassanian Iran, such as the veneration of indigenous Sogdian family or community divini-

ties, who are depicted as personified beings in frescoes. One such divinity is Vesh-parkar, the Sogdian representation of Vayu, the *yazata* (“being worthy of worship”) of the wind.⁵⁴ An illustration of Vesh-parkar in a building in Panjikent has an Indian appearance, with the three heads associated with his Buddhist equivalent, Shiva Mahadeva.⁵⁵ Elsewhere at Panjikent, one of the most commonly represented divinities, Nana, is portrayed centrally as a four-armed goddess on a lion. In Sogdian ideology and iconography Nana seems to have been partly assimilated with the Iranian creative and chthonic *yazata*, Spenta Armaiti, but also to have retained elements associated with the Mesopotamian goddess Nanaia, such as holding the sun and moon in two of her hands.⁵⁶ The lion is also the vehicle of the multiarmed Indian goddess, Durga.⁵⁷

One of the frescoes at Panjikent shows a scene of gods and humans lamenting the death of a young prince (or princess) who lies on a catafalque.⁵⁸ This may be a prototype of the cult of mourning centered on the Iranian hero Siyavush that is recorded by the tenth-century Islamic historian Narshakhi in his *History of Bukhara*.⁵⁹ Narshakhi relates that the people of Bukhara have lamentations on the slaying of Siyavush, “which is known in all regions, and the minstrels have made them into songs which they chant, and the singers call them ‘the weep-

48. These paintings are found on the walls of private houses and of a small shrine in Temple 2 Panjikent. Eleanor Sims, ed., *Peerless Images: Persian Painting and Its Sources* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 127; and Boris I. Marshak, “The Sogdians in Their Homeland,” in Julianio and Lerner, *Monks and Merchants*, 233. A clay pilaster fire holder was found in Temple 1 Panjikent and a smaller, ceramic one at Er-Kurgan. See Judith A. Lerner, “Central Asians in Sixth-Century China: A Zoroastrian Funerary Rite,” *Iranica Antiqua* 30 (1995): 182; and V. G. Shkoda, “The Sogdian Temple: Structure and Rituals,” *BAI* 10 (1996 [1998]): 197.

49. L. V. Pavchinskaja, “Sogdian Ossuaries,” *BAI* 8 (1994 [1996]): 224. Before that, the earliest form was probably burial in jars. Vessels with food, golden coins, and bracteates were also often placed in the tombs.

50. See G. A. Pugachenkova, “The Form and Style of Sogdian Ossuaries,” *BAI* 8 (1994 [1996]): 227–43, particularly 235–40.

51. Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 182–83. According to Wei-Jie, the bones were collected and buried, but without a special coffin. The placement of bones in a decorated

ceramic ossuary is evidenced as practiced throughout Sogdiana and Chorasmia and into Xinjiang, but not in inner China. Lerner, “Merchant Empire,” 226.

52. Pavchinskaja, “Sogdian Ossuaries,” 219.

53. Ilya Yakubovich determines that the Arabic term *nāwūs* refers in this instance to a Zoroastrian bone depository, not a place of interment: Ilya Yakubovich, “Mugh 1.1. Revisited,” *Studia Iranica* 31 (2002): 249.

54. The name Vesh-parkar comes from an Avestan phrase *vaiiūš uparō.kairiō*, “the wind whose activity is in the upper regions” (*Videvdad* 19.13, my translation, based on Sims-Williams’s reading). See Nicholas Sims-Williams, “Some Reflections on Zoroastrianism in Sogdiana and Bactria,” in *Realms of the Silk Roads: Ancient and Modern*, ed. David Christian and Craig Benjamin, *Silk Road Studies* 4 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), 5.

55. Frantz Grenet, “Religious Diversity,” 473.

56. See G. Azarpay, “Nana, the Sumero-Akkadian Goddess of Transoxiana,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 96 (1976): 541. Azarpay compares Sogdian depictions of Nana with those of the Khotanese Saka *śśāndrāmātā*, whose name is the equivalent of Spenta Armaiti.

57. Nana is depicted on a lion on Kushan coins and was regarded as Ves-Shiva, the wife of Shiva, that is, Parvati/Durga. See G. Azarpay, *Sogdian Painting: The Pictorial Epic in Oriental Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 30.

58. Marshak later identified this scene, in Temple 2, as a cult mourning for a goddess. Marshak, “Panjikent,” 16.

59. See Azarpay, *Sogdian Painting*, 129. Similar scenes are found on a vase from Merv and a chest from Tok-Kala. For a connection between this cult of mourning and the Islamic Shia rituals at Ashura, see Ehsan Yarshater, “Ta’ziyeh and Pre-Islamic Mourning Rituals in Iran,” in *Ta’ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. P. Chelkowski (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 88–94. The Middle Persian *Shahrestaniha i Eranshahr* states that Siyavush completed the city of Samarqand, which had been founded by his father. See Touraj Daryaei, *Šahrestānīhā ī Erānšahr: A Middle Persian Text on Late Antique Geography, Epic, and History* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2002), 17. In *Shahnama*, Siyavush was said to have founded the citadel at Bukhara.

ing of the magi.”⁶⁰ Other illustrations at Panjikent have been identified as the Iranian themes of *razm o bazm*—“fighting and feasting”; the exploits of the legendary Iranian hero Rustam on his horse, Rakhsh; and animal fables similar to those of Aesop or the Indian *Panchatantra*.⁶¹ A study of some of the earlier murals at Panjikent and Samarkand revealed the same distinctive treatment of drapery folds, and the appearance of a lotus-shaped motif, as appear on ninth-century Manichaean miniature paintings on manuscripts and walls at Qocho. It has been suggested that some of these stylistic approaches may have influenced—or at least stimulated—Islamic miniature painting in the Ilkhanid and later Timurid periods, the latter being centered in Sogdiana.⁶²

Sogdian Merchant Activity in China

A Chinese history of the Tang dynasty, the *Xin Tang shu*, describes Sogdians in general as good at business: they enjoy making a profit, and their young men at twenty would go out to neighboring countries to engage in commerce.⁶³ Evidence of such Sogdian expansionist trading venture has come to light in both Xinjiang and the Chinese interior in recent years. During the fifth and sixth centuries CE, many Sogdians took up residence in the Hexi Corridor, then inner China, where they retained autonomy in terms of governance and had a designated official administrator named a *sabao*, which derives from an earlier Sogdian title for a “caravan leader.”⁶⁴ Textual sources from the Sui (581–618 CE) and Tang periods, as well as epitaphs on Sogdian funerary monuments, describe the arrival in China of ancestors from the homeland. For instance, a sarcophagus found at Xi’an in 2003 belonged to a Sogdian *sabao* named Wirkak (Chinese *Shi*), whose name denotes that his ancestors had come from Kish

(modern Shahr-i Sabz).⁶⁵ The bilingual Sino-Sogdian epitaph informs that Wirkak’s grandfather had also been a *sabao* and that his wife, Lady Kang, was also of Sogdian origin.⁶⁶ Wirkak died in his eighty-sixth year, in 579 CE, and his wife a month later.⁶⁷

Several intricately decorated stone funerary couches of wealthy Sogdian traders from northern China have also recently come to light. One such funerary bed was made for an anonymous merchant, who lived and died in sixth-century China. This artifact, now in the Miho Museum in Shigaraki, Japan, depicts a camel caravan, suggesting that the merchant may have died while on a trading journey, although such scenes of trade activity are echoed on Wirkak’s sarcophagus and other Sogdian funerary monuments from China.⁶⁸

By this time, Sogdians were becoming increasingly absorbed into the local Chinese population, but specifically Zoroastrian scenes on the mortuary couches and other memorials indicate that, although the surrounding culture of the deceased was Chinese, the predominant religious expression remained that of Sogdian Zoroastrianism.⁶⁹ The Zoroastrian faith of the anonymous merchant is indicated by one panel that portrays a priest wearing a *padan*—a mouth cover—to prevent him from polluting the sacred fire in its holder; a small table nearby contains round items which might be pomegranates or other ceremonial food.⁷⁰ The setting suggests the enactment of an *afrinagan* ceremony, such as is still performed by Zoroastrians on the fourth morning after death. Other aspects of the panel corroborate this identification of a Zoroastrian funerary ritual, alongside some elements of an eastern Iranian mourning cult.⁷¹

The stone funerary couch would have prevented the body of the deceased from coming into contact with the earth or water, in keeping

60. Yarshater, “Ta’ziyeh and Pre-Islamic Mourning Rituals,” 90.

61. Marshak, “Panjikent,” 16–18.

62. Azarpay, *Sogdian Painting*, 170–80; Klimkeit, *Manichaean Art and Calligraphy*, 19–20.

63. De la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 160.

64. Whitfield and Sims-Williams, *Silk Road*, 21. The word *sabao* is found in the address of Ancient Letter V and seems to derive originally from an Indian *sartha-vaha* (caravaneer), via Bactrian intermediary to Sogdian *s’rtp’w*. Sims-Williams, “Sogdian Merchants,” 51.

65. For an identification of the Chinese character *Shi* with Kish, see Grenet, “Religious Diversity,” 465.

66. Lerner, “Shorter Notices,” 151.

67. Grenet, “Religious Diversity,” 465.

68. Another funerary couch from Anyang, in northern Xi’an, depicts a *sabao* named An Qie (d. 579 CE) in his garden receiving a delegation from the Sogdian community. Annette L. Juliano, “Chinese Pictorial Space at the Cultural Crossroads,” *Ērān ud Anērān: Webfestschrift Marshak*, 2003, www.transoxiana.org/Eran/Articles/juliano.html (2004).

69. Grenet, “Religious Diversity,” 418.

70. See James R. Russell, “Zoroastrianism and the Northern Qi Panels,” in *Armenian and Iranian Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and Armenian Heritage Press, 2004), 1447; Judith A. Lerner, “Central Asians,” 180.

71. For detailed analyses of these elements, see Lerner, “Central Asians”; and Russell, “Zoroastrianism.”

with Zoroastrian custom. The eastern wall of Wirkak's sarcophagus seems to depict this moment. Zoroastrian priests with *padan* stand at the entrance to the Chinvat Bridge, where the soul is judged and its afterlife determined.⁷² The bridge is guarded by two dogs. Wirkak and his wife are depicted leading a group of departed souls across the bridge. The souls have been judged favorably and cannot now be harmed by the two beasts in the raging waters below.⁷³ Such images appear to be pictorial representations of events relating to the fate of the soul as described in Zoroastrian texts. In those texts, however, the soul is not accompanied by others when it crosses the bridge.⁷⁴ Animals are also shown crossing the bridge, and the fact that one of them is a camel laden with wares reflects the particular concerns of the Sogdian merchant and his wife.

By the seventh century most of the larger northern Chinese towns with a Sogdian population of more than two hundred had a *sabao*, whose rank was respected and rewarded as the equivalent of a mandarin.⁷⁵ That local Chinese leaders were not granted the same rank shows the Sogdians' socioeconomic importance.⁷⁶ Although the *sabao* apparently acted as an administrator for the temple, it is not clear whether his role was also that of a priest.⁷⁷ Evidence of the construction of Zoroastrian temples (*xian*) in inner China include one that was restored in Changan in 631 CE.⁷⁸ These were, presumably, to serve the Sogdian community, although embassies from the Sassanians had also developed trading relations with the Wei in the mid-fifth century, so these temples could have been for the Persians.⁷⁹ About 670 CE, the Sassanian crown prince, Peroz, and members of the court

were granted refuge in China and the protection of the Tang court.⁸⁰

A Chinese document listing taxes paid on caravan trade in the Turpan region in the early decades of the seventh century discloses that twenty-nine out of thirty-five commercial transactions involved Sogdian merchants and that in thirteen of those operations both the buyer and seller were Sogdian.⁸¹ Sogdian fire temples (*xian*) are mentioned at Turpan and Hami from the seventh century, and eighth-century Chinese sources mention a *xian* on the eastern edge of the town of Dunhuang, which had a courtyard and a main hall with religious paintings of "deities" and twenty niches.⁸² According to later Chinese sources, the fire temple at Dunhuang lasted until the early second millennium. Local government in these towns allocated material support to Zoroastrians for annual offerings (*saixian*).⁸³ This probably refers to *afrinagan* ceremonies or to seasonal festivals (*gahambars*) such as Fravardigan, which were also celebrated by the Chorasmians and Persians.⁸⁴

After the Tang dynasty had conquered the Turkic Qaghans in the mid-seventh century CE, the Sogdian city-states were accepted as nominal vassals of China. The king of Samarqand, Varkhuman (r. ca. 650–70 CE), acknowledged nominal Tang control, and Sogdian merchants were able to register as Chinese residents.⁸⁵ Gifts offered in diplomatic tribute each year by the Sogdians included the "golden peaches" of Samarqand, saffron, medicinal herbs, jewels, and gems, as well as living merchandise in the form of lions, leopards, horses, and dogs.⁸⁶ On a seventh-century CE mural in a palace at Samarqand, a king—possibly Varkhuman, who is

72. Grenet, "Religious Diversity," 469.

73. Ibid., 472.

74. Ibid., 475–76. Grenet maintains that the Zoroastrian elements of the scenes on Wirkak's sarcophagus are balanced by elements that belong to Manichaean eschatology.

75. De la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 152.

76. Ibid.

77. De la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 151.

78. Edward H. Schafer, "Iranian Merchants in T'ang Dynasty Tales," in *Semitic and Oriental Studies*, ed. W. J. Fischel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 408.

79. On Sassanian trade with the Wei, see *ibid.*, 403.

80. Schafer, *Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, 10.

81. De la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 134.

82. On *xian* at Turpan and Hami, see *ibid.*, 128, 129n23. On the Dunhuang *xian*, see Frantz Grenet and Zhang Guangda, "The Last Refuge of the Sogdian Religion: Dunhuang in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries," *BAI* 10 (1996 [1998]). See also Albert E. Dien, "A Note on Hsien 'Zoroastrianism,'" *Oriens* 10 (1957): 284–88.

83. Grenet chooses the gloss *bao* for *sai* to translate the term as "thanksgiving" and considers this to allude to an *afrinagan* ceremony. The supplies at Dunhuang comprise thirty sheets of paper "to paint the *xian* deities," but there is also reference to alcohol; at Turpan, cereals are mentioned for the "cult of the heavenly god," perhaps designating Ohrmazd. See Grenet and Guangda, "Last Refuge," 181–83.

84. On *afrinagan* ceremonies, see *ibid.*, 182. On seasonal festivals, see Shkoda, "Sogdian Temple," 202; and also Nicholas Sims-Williams and François de Blois, "The Bactrian Calendar," *BAI* 10 (1996 [1998]): 152.

85. Marshak, "Sogdians in Their Homeland," 234. The Sogdians had to pay taxes and to perform military duties and corvée labor, like any Chinese citizen.

86. De la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 138; and Schafer, *Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, 58–70, 76–77, 84–88, 117, 124–26, 188, 194, 222–49.

named in an inscription on the western wall—is depicted enthroned, receiving delegates from many countries offering highly prized commodities.⁸⁷ The scene epitomizes the diplomacy of good trading relations. The so-called Ambassadors' Paintings could perhaps illustrate the Zoroastrian Nav Ruz ceremonies and may play a role similar to the representations of ritual gift-giving on the stairs to the *apadana* (the audience hall) at Persepolis.⁸⁸

On the western wall of the hall at Samarkand, Turkish envoys are identified by their long plaits, and Chinese ambassadors are shown bringing gifts of silk in the triple form of cocoons, hanks, and rolls of cloth. By this time, the secret of silk making had been obtained in Central Asia, purportedly through a Chinese princess, who had smuggled silkworm cocoons in her headdress on her way to marry the king of Khotan. The legend maintains that this was to ensure that she had her own steady supply of silk for her clothing.⁸⁹ But high-quality silk textiles from China still demanded high prices and continued to dominate the market.

In the mural, three other envoys wear colorful robes with Iranian motifs—the boar, ducks with pearls, and the so-called *senmurv* (the “*Saena* bird” of Avestan myth), respectively—inside roundel designs. Although some of the murals at Samarkand imitate the Chinese style, such Iranian motifs are nonetheless found across the Xinjiang region, suggesting that it was the Sogdians who transported this iconography. The appeal of Iranian design to the Chinese is supported by a Sui-era report from 605 CE that a Sogdian named He Chou was placed, by imperial decree, in control of some of the Sichuan workshops producing silks woven with “western motifs.”⁹⁰ A seventh- or eighth-century

child's silk jacket and pants intended for a Tibetan prince exemplifies one such motif in its stylized pairs of ducks in roundels.⁹¹ By this time, silk made in Sogdiana was being exported along the trade routes to both east and west.⁹² Decorating the tomb of St. Domitian in the Collegiate Church of Notre-Dame in Huy, Belgium, was a piece of eighth-century Sogdian silk patterned with lions in medallions. This cloth has a Sogdian inscription identifying it as *zandaniji* (that is, from Zandan, near Bukhara), which may have been a general designation for specific motifs on a range of different textiles from Sogdiana.⁹³ The discovery of such fine goods outside Sogdiana may provide evidence of a trading model that reserved the most valuable goods for export.⁹⁴

Although trading routes across Central Asia were closed during the Tibetan domination of the eastern Tarim Basin, they reopened when the Chinese assumed control of the region. The presence of Sogdians in the Tang courts is well documented in Chinese sources, where they are described as a people engaged in commerce, who are fond of music and wine.⁹⁵ Sogdian music was popular at court banquets, and another panel of the Miho couch shows the deceased merchant and his wife dining, while entertained by musicians and a Sogdian dancer. Popular performers from Samarkand, Kish, and Chach at the Tang court in Chang'an were the “leaping” and “whirling” dancers, who presented the *hutengwu* and *huxuanwu* dances, respectively.⁹⁶ Tang poets describe the “western twirling girls” as wearing colorful shirts and flowing pantaloons, with boots of red deerskin.⁹⁷ Male dancers from Sogdiana were also popular and are represented on Tang-era *mingqi*. One such *mingqi* from Gansu province depicts a large-

87. On the inscription, see Whitfield and Sims-Williams, *Silk Road*, 110.

88. Matteo Compareti, “Afrāsiāb: II. Wall Paintings,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, www.iranica.com/articles/afraasiab-ii-wall-paintings-2 (2009).

89. S. H. Wriggins, *The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang*, rev. ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2004), 176.

90. From the *Sui shu*. See Matteo Compareti, “The Role of the Sogdian Colonies in the Diffusion of the Pearl Roundels Pattern,” in *Ērān ud Anērān: Webfestschrift Marshak*, 2003, www.transoxiana.org/Eran/Articles/compareti.html (2004).

91. The outfit, in the Cleveland Museum of Art, dates from the period of Tibetan power in eastern Central Asia and the trade routes from Sogdiana to China (ca. 600–842 CE).

92. Whitfield, *Life along the Silk Road*, 30.

93. Frye, “Bukhara and Zandaniji,” 75, 79.

94. *Ibid.*, 80.

95. Compareti, “Role of the Sogdian Colonies.”

96. Lerner, “Shorter Notices,” 153.

97. Schafer, *Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, 56.

nosed male wearing an elongated Phrygian cap and a tight-sleeved tunic, such as ascribed to dancers from Chach by Tang court poets.⁹⁸ A contemporary account describes how a general of mixed Sogdian-Turkic descent named An-Lushan (Iranian *Rokhshan*) was taught the whirling dance by one of the Tang emperor's concubines.⁹⁹

This apparently symbiotic relationship between Sogdians and Tang Chinese did not endure until the end of the dynasty. In fact, it was the military action of An-Lushan in leading a revolt in northeastern China that brought an end to Sogdian mercantile dominance. This revolt, sometimes described as "the Sogdian rebellion," resulted in a war lasting from 755 to 763 CE. It was supported by many Sogdian traders in northern China, but the Uighur Qaghan's support for the Tang in the west resulted in those Sogdians being isolated from their bases in the Tarim Basin and Sogdiana.¹⁰⁰ Afterward, many Sogdians in China were brutally slain, and those who survived sought to change their names to hide their foreign identity.¹⁰¹ From this point onward, not much is known about the Sogdian presence in northern China.

It is clear, however, that Uighur Qaghan came into contact with resident Sogdian Manicheans in Luoyang and converted in about 762 CE, after which Manichaeism became the Uighur religion. With Uighur political backing, Manichean Sogdians in China received protection, and several new temples were constructed including one in Changan and others in Luoyang and Yangzhou.¹⁰² These Sogdians were free to engage in commerce and continued to flourish for the better part of a century, until the Uighur state was overrun by the Kirghiz in 840 CE, after which both the religion and its practitioners returned to a disadvantaged state, except in the area around Qocho, where most of the later Manichaean texts were found. Although the Chinese were still anxious to have good relations with the Central Asians on their borders, in between 843 and 845 recognition of all "foreign religions" including Buddhism was

withdrawn by the Tang emperor, Wu-Tsung, in support of indigenous Taoism.

By this time Sogdians in the homeland were ruled by the Abbasid caliphate. Although there had been several uprisings in Samarqand and elsewhere in Sogdiana, Islam had become the dominant religion of the region. But the diversity of religious expression that had been one of the hallmarks of the Sogdian contribution to trade and culture lived on largely through the fine arts of the Islamic world. The Sogdians had learned the art of papermaking from the Chinese and were renowned for the quality of their paper.¹⁰³ This craft was put to use by the many Islamic savants in Samarqand and Bukhara during the rule of the Persian-speaking Samanids (819–999 CE) and quickly became a medium not only for the textual transmission of Islam but also for the articulation of Iranian mythology. Remnants of the richness of the Sogdian culture may be preserved in the legends of Rostam and Siyavush in Ferdowsi's *Shahnama*; in the tales of the Indian *Panchatantra*, traditionally translated into Middle Persian by Khosrow I's physician, Burzoy, and later into Arabic as *Kalilah wa Dimnah*; in the songs, and acts, of mourning for fallen Iranian heroes; and, not least, in the intricate scenes of courtly life and poetic narrative expressed in Islamic miniatures. S

98. Judith A. Lerner, "Dancing Central Asian," in Juliano and Lerner, *Monks and Merchants*, 254, 255, fig. 82.

99. Schafer, *Golden Peaches of Samarkand*, 56.

100. De la Vaissière, *Sogdian Traders*, 217–18.

101. Ibid., 221.

102. Samuel L. C. Lieu, "Manichaeism V. in China," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, www.iranica.com/articles/manichaeism-v-in-china-1 (2002).

103. F. Wood, *The Silk Road: Two Thousand Years in the Heart of Asia* (London: The British Library, 2002), 67.